

MAREK STACHOWSKI

Kraków

### **Bronisław Malinowski and linguistics**

In the last weeks of the year 2000 a two-volume monograph on Bronisław Malinowski's linguistic studies appeared in Cracow<sup>1</sup>. While volume I of the edition is an academic monograph in the traditional sense of the word, volume II is of a somewhat unusual character (see *infra*). But let us, first of all, explain the title of the work.

The Polish formulation *Językoznawstwo Bronisława Malinowskiego* is, as a matter of fact, ambiguous. It can be interpreted both as Malinowski's understanding of linguistics and as his linguistic work. Fortunately, both interpretations are correct in this case. The fact, however, that Malinowski was also engaged in linguistics might surprise some students who envisage him only as a great ethnologist, whereas actually he was interested in linguistic problems and research as much as possible, even if he only devoted two publications to linguistic themes. It should, however, be added that "there are also typescript copies of a further 200 unpublished texts and lexeme lists in the LSE (= London School of Economics) archives" – vol. I, p. 317, fn. 2. It is a real paradox that his attitude towards linguistics, which he considered to be the central discipline among the humanities (I 317), was entirely eclipsed by his ethnological achievements. In this situation, the main task of the author was to analyse Malinowski's understanding of linguistics and to present his work in this domain.

Volume I is written by Krystyna Pisarkowa who is the author of a number of studies on Malinowski published between 1995 and 2000. It contains an analysis and is intended for every scholar understanding Polish; it contains, to be sure, also an English summary by T. Bałuk-Ulewiczowa (p. 317–342) but this text of 25 pages cannot offer much more than a general orientation on the Polish text of about 300 pages. The volume consists of six chapters (p. 7–283) followed by a bibliography (p. 285–303), a biographical calendar (p. 305–307), a list of the seventeen pictures published in the volume (p. 309), some being real rarities from private collections

---

<sup>1</sup> *Językoznawstwo Bronisława Malinowskiego*, vol. I by Krystyna Pisarkowa; vol II ed. by Krystyna Pisarkowa and Tadeusz Szczerbowski, Kraków: Universitas 2000 [address: Prof. Krystyna Pisarkowa, Instytut Filologii Orientalnej, Collegium Paderevianum, al. Mickiewicza 9/11, PL – 31-120 Kraków, Poland].

or archives, an index of names (p. 311–316) and the English summary mentioned above (p. 317–342). The chapters are as follows: I: Introduction (p. 7–31); II: The Cracovian biography of Bronisław Malinowski, “British” anthropologist (p. 33–68); III: Mainland and islands (p. 69–131); IV: The phenomenon of meaning (p. 133–179); V: The units of language and their context (p. 181–236); VI: Malinowski’s linguistic creed (p. 237–283). The title of chapter III does not reveal its linguistic contents – it is devoted to linguistic material collected and analysed by B. Malinowski, first of all to his research into Kiriwinian (~ Kilivila) “classificatory particles” and other grammatical functors.

Volume II was edited by K. Pisarkowa and T. Szczerbowski. It contains a Polish translation of two linguistic studies by Malinowski, originally published in English: “The problem of meaning in primitive languages” (which first appeared as a supplement to his book *The meaning of meaning*, 1923) and “Classificatory particles in the language of Kiriwina” (*BSOAS* 1, 1920). The third part of the volume is a Kiriwinian-Polish and Polish-Kiriwinian dictionary by T. Szczerbowski (p. 113–417), preceded by some general and technical remarks (p. 105–111). The Kiriwinian-Polish part of the dictionary presents material compiled from seven published works (incl. the 1995 edition of Malinowski’s letters) and ten archive sources (II 109sq.). Although T. Szczerbowski informs us that this part of the dictionary contains about 6,000 entries we cannot precisely know how many words there actually are since the editors have decided to put each attested grammatical formation as a separate entry (II 107)<sup>2</sup> so that one can find for instance the following entries one after another: *bu-ku-megwa-si* ‘you [Pl.] could conjure up’, *bu-ku-mwoyne* ‘climb! [Sg.]’, *bu-ku-sagali-se* ‘you [Pl.] could divide’, *bu-ku-sakay-se* ‘you [Pl.] could give’, *bu-ku-seye-mwo* ‘lay [it] here! [Sg.]’, *bu-ku-sili* ‘you [Sg.] could sit down’, *bu-ku-si-mwoy-sa-ga* ‘you [Pl.] could sit here’ and so on (II 134). The volume ends with a list of five pictures (II 419) which are all taken from Malinowski’s books published hitherto. As can be seen, this volume is intended for Polish readers rather than for foreign researchers who will surely continue to use the English originals of Malinowski’s studies as well as Gunter Senft’s grammar and dictionary of Kiriwinian (1986).

Now, was Malinowski a really good linguist or just an ethnologist who was compelled to obtain some practical knowledge on the vernacular of the people he worked with? There is no doubt, the former is right. And not only because his father was a linguist (Slavic Philology). Malinowski whose notion of “classificatory particles” is so weighty for the typology of languages attached much importance to linguistics, studied it seriously, was deeply interested in semantics and syntax, and had his own opinion on how a language is to be learnt and described. Besides, it is not quite right that he was an antagonist of dictionaries; he required, to be sure, the study of language through texts but he also pondered on what sort of information a dictionary entry should contain and he had begun to arrange word lists [II 105sq.] so that it seems quite

<sup>2</sup> Probably the number of approximately 3,000 entries in the Polish-Kiriwinian part reflects more correctly the number of lexemes.

probable that he was thinking of writing a dictionary himself. Malinowski had good linguistic teachers in Cracow and good discussion partners all over the world, one of the most famous among them being Jerzy Kuryłowicz. Does Malinowski's thought deserve analysis and further discussion? It is enough to look at G. Senft's bibliography to see how inspiring his ideas are even today. K. Pisarkowa, too, is inspired by his work and she tries to understand him and present his ideas in the way he would have liked it most: in the broadest possible cultural context. She compares Malinowski with Franz Boas, she needs to assume an attitude to Franz Kafka and Joseph Conrad, she mentions a great many personalities who are hard to find in other linguistic monographs. And all this is based on a thorough knowledge of linguistics and cultural history, and is enriched through her personal study of archive materials. The author not only reports on Malinowski's analyses and ideas but also sketches the linguistic background and presents, here and there, her own interpretation of some problems.

There could probably scarcely be a better illustration of Malinowski's inspiring power and conviction that a broad context makes us understand people better.